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SUBJECT: JERUSALEM MEDIA REACTION (8/26): A First Step towards Full Release of all Palestinian Prisoners?

Main Stories:

The three dailies lead with news about the huge popular reception organized on August 25 in the Presidential Compound in Ramallah for the 199 Palestinian prisoners released from Israeli jails. Carrying large, above-the-fold photos of the released prisoners with Palestinian Authority (PA) President Mahmoud Abbas, the dailies report that Abbas confirmed at the reception that the Palestinians want peace and that peace will be achieved only if all prisoners are released. The dailies report that the released prisoners also visited the tomb of the late Yasser Arafat.

All the dailies highlight news about the visit of the U.S. Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, to the region on August 25. They report that in her meetings with Palestinians and Israelis in Jerusalem, Rice confirmed the Bush administration's commitment to achieving a two-state solution. The Palestinian Chief Negotiator, Ahmed Qureia, stressed that the continuing Israeli settlement activities, the establishment of walls, the erection of checkpoints, and the West Bank closures will not lead to peace.

The dailies also front-page news of the Fatah Central Committee's preparations to hold their sixth General Conference. The dailies report that PA President Abbas held three meetings on August 23 and 24 in Ramallah and announced on August 25 that the preparations for the sixth General Conference will soon be finalized.

Al-Ayyam and Al-Hayat Al-Jadida highlight news about the Palestinian factions' talks in Cairo. Citing a DBA report, Al-Ayyam writes that the Hamas leader, Mahmoud Al-Zahar, denied in an interview with the Egyptian daily Al-Quds Al-Arabi on August 25 that the Hamas leader Khaled Mish'al had arrived in Cairo to discuss Egyptian efforts to launch the Palestinian national dialogue. Al-Zahar asserted that it

was the Islamic Jihad movement that had arrived, not Mish'al. Al-Zahar confirmed that the chances of the national dialogue succeeding were "difficult" due to the "American veto on reconciliation." In addition, he rejected the notion of allowing Arab forces to enter the Gaza Strip. In related coverage in Al-Ayyam and Al-Hayat Al-Jadida cited from Reuters, unnamed officials said that the new round of Egyptian efforts for reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah that was launched on August 25 will not be able to achieve reconciliation. One of the officials said that Egypt is not satisfied with Hamas because the latter is hindering the talks with their insistence on conditions for a prisoner exchange deal with Israeli that would include the captive Israeli soldier, Shalit.

Al-Ayyam cites DBA that Islamic Jihad confirmed on August 25 in Cairo that it is committed to the Hamas-Israel truce in the Gaza Strip despite Israel's "lack of commitment."

BLOCK QUOTES:

¶1. Under the headline "Congratulations on the Prisoners' Release, What's next..!" (8/26), Independent Al-Quds opined in its main editorial: "This is a first step, and Israel should consider it as such, towards the comprehensive release of thousands of Palestinian prisoners crowding Israeli jails and detentions camps, most of whom

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have been thrown there without undergoing a fair trial or through administrative detention orders or due to confidential evidence that was never revealed. In any case, the release of ALL the prisoners, without categorizing or classifying them or applying irrational and illegal standards, is a national Palestinian demand that should have been accomplished a long time ago, despite the objections of the extremists in Israeli society ... Everybody realizes by observing the experiences of global liberation movements that the release of prisoners is the first step in any peace agreement, whether transitional or permanent, because only through this can evidence of good intentions and complete seriousness be illustrated ... The international community and its legal and humanitarian institutions have an obligation to close the [prisoners] file and do away with all its negative and frustrating implications for the Palestinians and the peace process in general."

¶2. Independent Al-Ayyam runs a daily editorial by Hani Al-Masri entitled, "Regarding the Idea of Bringing Arab Forces into the Gaza Strip" (8/26): "... [T]he danger of getting assistance from Arab forces, even in the Gaza Strip, is that firstly, it requires approval from Israel because in order for this idea to take place, the items of the 1979 agreement between Israel and Egypt must be reviewed, especially the items regarding the demilitarized areas. Secondly, this idea affects the temporary crossing agreement from ¶2005. This agreement stipulates Israeli approval on any procedures, moves, or transportation taking place at the Israeli-Palestinian crossings and borders."

WALLES